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ABSTRACT

For one educator, an assistant professor of English with a specialization in writing, the short but dramatic move "up the block" from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) to DePaul University eight miles north occasioned an adjustment to a radically different institutional personality and student body, despite similar street addresses. This paper narrates some aspects of this transition. It states that what is missed most about graduate school is the loss of a graduate student community in which membership alone meant trust on at least some core level because affiliations formed around "class"--mutual status as academic underlings. And it finds that, for a faculty member, the independence can be great, but loneliness is inevitable. The paper explains how the MA in Writing is structured and how this affects the department (and departmental politics), as well as the decorousness of the students at DePaul as opposed to those at UIC. The problems raised in the paper--a literature-entrenched department, an often passive student body--are not unique. According to the paper, the educator learned to construct her teacher identity in what Laura Micciche calls a specific "mesosystem," the general climate of the department and the institution, collegial relations, and relations with the administration. The paper suggests that with every new teaching mesosystem a teacher must reconstruct his/her teacher identity. (NKA)

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by Julie A. Bokser

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Julie A. Bokser

Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Moving Up the Block: Learning to Think Like a Peer

My title is not metaphorical. In September 2000 when I became an assistant professor of English with a specialization in writing at DePaul University, I literally moved up the block. The University of Illinois at Chicago, the state school where I did my graduate training, is housed on Halsted Street about 3 miles southwest of this hotel. Just 8 miles north of UIC, also on Halsted Street sits my current office in McGaw Hall at DePaul, a private liberal arts institution that has in the past 18 years increased its enrollment by 43% to become the nation's largest Catholic higher education institution, enrolling more than 20,000 students. This short but dramatic move up the block has occasioned an adjustment to a radically different institutional personality and student body, despite similar street addresses. What I'll do today is narrate some aspects of this transition. I should confess at the outset that I am hoping to paint a picture that might help someone else, but that I also seek to hear from others who are going or have been through similar transitions.

Because I had nine years of professional experience as an editor, journalist, and public relations specialist, I expected that when I finally finished grad school and resumed earning a reasonable wage, the transition wouldn't be a problem. But in some ways my prior experience made things harder, at least initially. In the beginning of grad school teaching, I thought I should be in my office all day, every day, as I had done in the job I'd just left. I soon realized that was not only silly, but also impossible if I were to

get my own coursework done. Still, in my first few weeks as a Professor, I again worried about "face time," this time wondering if my new colleagues would raise their eyebrows when I wasn't in my office. This concern faded quickly (how could they know if they weren't in their offices themselves?). But others lingered. Should I talk at meetings or not? Was I expected at collegewide meetings or not? Far more than with other jobs I've held, all sorts of expectations were unclear and unspoken. Just how to get basic office supplies like a stapler and scissors took some initiative. In other jobs, the systems for most of the above were much more explicit. There, I walked into an office that was already set up and was told what meetings to go to and what the politics were (OK, not always the politics.) At my last full-time job before grad school we were a unit of 4 people and all went to lunch together all the time. You learn a lot quickly that way. Here at DePaul, my department has about 30 tenure track faculty and lots more instructors; it's very diffuse and we all do our own thing. The independence can be great, but it results in a much slower learning curve.

Initially, the biggest shift was simply authorizing myself to move from grad student to faculty. This is what prompted the other part of my title, "learning to think like a peer." I was so used to attending faculty meetings and not having a say, to making editorial changes just to please my committee members. Then as an interviewee I had to please the chairs and search committees. Now, I was supposed to shift and treat the chair and other faculty I had so recently sought to please as equals. Or was it equals? A department chair isn't a boss but is a boss in ways that are still somewhat unclear to me. Aside from having to figure out who needed more and who less equal treatment, I really

had to figure out how to see myself as equal first. Grad school is a giant mind game and it takes a while to crawl out of it.

This phase has now passed and I'm not sure I can offer advice on how to get through it other than to say one simply does crawl out. Now, in my second year at DePaul, I am in a second transitional phase. I now know how to talk to the chair as a chair/colleague, and how to assert myself regarding things like schedule changes and, to some extent, programmatic proposals. But once one catches one's breath in phase two, the loneliness hits. Laura Micciche has written eloquently about the inevitability of loneliness in academic life in the most recent *College English*. While she attempts to sketch positive uses for loneliness as a way of standing one's ground, and to warn of the perils of "a loneliness that refuses to acknowledge people-not-like-me," what I face right now is the more banal yet no less damaging loneliness of walking past unsmiling student workers before ignoring the few open doors of my colleagues and then opening and immediately shutting the door of my 10 ½ x 12 ½ windowless and very hot office (447). In my last nonacademic job, I knew what everyone's bagel preferences were and when and why my wall mate wasn't sleeping in the same room as her husband.

I couldn't wait to finish grad school but I recognize now that I didn't appreciate how lonely I wasn't. What I miss most of all is the loss of a graduate student community in which membership alone meant trust on at least some core level because affiliations formed around "class"—our mutual status as academic underlings. Furthermore, I miss the convenience of the graduate student construction of Us versus Them where Them are unfeeling administrators or evil, inaccessible faculty. I have now become Them. Yet everyone else is also Them; there is no Us. This is so even though (and I am not paying

lip service here) I reside in a friendly department where the college-wide tenure record is quite good. Nevertheless, the pressure of the tenure process itself is intense, tense, and, what I didn't expect, immediate. In their national survey of rhetoric and composition graduate students, Scott Miller and his co-authors identify an "ohmygodigotta" (that's all one word) anxiety regarding the need for conference papers, publications, and the like (404). This anxiety doesn't end with graduate school. "Ohmygodistillgotta!" And now one must be cagey when sharing this anxiety with fellow junior faculty. After all, they'll probably be voting members when I go before the committee.

The survey I just referenced suggests making these kinds of professional issues a part of the graduate curriculum, as well as improving accountability about both the job market and individual program's strengths, and calling for "quality mentoring." I would also add grant writing and academic administration to the list of things I should have known. But my ignorance here is subtler than being shown a proposal outline or reporting tree. I've actually written social service grants in my past life. This didn't help me when I sat down to write my first proposal. A full day went by before I realized that it was legitimate, even expected, to ask for money as salary compensation. I just couldn't believe that someone would pay me to go to the library. Recently, I agonized over the wording of a letter to the dean asking for money for a writing center breakfast here at 4Cs. My background includes six years in nonprofit fundraising. In that world, asking for money is sensitive business. It would have helped if someone had explained to me that what deans do is dispense money. Without all the sensitive, constituency-building rapport needed with a private donor. (Well, I was asking for under $1000; I'm sure deans need as much backscratching as the rest of us. Also, I feel called upon to say that Stanley

Fish arrived as the new Dean at UIC the same year I went on the market, so I didn't witness his rather public deaning first-hand.)

Despite the picture I fear I'm painting here, I really was a fairly savvy graduate student. Many of the issues I'm raising I probably heard about then, even if it wasn't through a curricular or mentoring program. But at least in my case, I seem to have to *be* in the position before these issues become real and personally meaningful. I might have known deans dispense money, but I didn't know how to be the person who asked for some of the pot. Thus, it's a problem of rhetorical authority, similar to what our students face when they are asked to do something like critique Sigmund Freud—"who am I to…" As I tell students, authority comes by doing and only with time. So I'm not sure we can expect a panel like this or even better mentoring to do much more than raise awareness. Nevertheless, I'm determined to leave you with at least one piece of concrete advice.

Thought for the day: When evaluating potential academic employers, job candidates should give careful consideration to how the department's major is constructed. I was and remain excited by the opportunities afforded by DePaul's MA in Writing, as well as by the large cadre of colleagues in my field (our tenure track faculty in writing currently number 12). But I was so excited that I gave the major only a cursory review. Yet, as one of my writing colleagues recently remarked, in a department without a PhD program, the center of power is the major. We offer a traditional literary major with nine required courses, leaving 5 electives from which a major could choose a writing course. But the writing courses are not offered with majors in mind, and most majors, being literary-minded and advised by mostly literature professors, do not choose writing courses as electives (except for creative writing). The upshot is twofold: 1) I

presently teach advanced writing classes that are required by *other* departments and not attended by English majors. It's a challenge to teach almost all required courses, presenting me with an ever-resistant audience and a perhaps distorted view of the DePaul student body. 2) Under departmental discussion right now is a newly proposed writing studies concentration that would enable students who don't want to engage in purely literary study to learn about theories of rhetoric and style, and to perform creative, socially significant, and professional writing. Since the major is the power center, the reception and discussion of this proposal is exceedingly tense. It's a quick lesson in the political enclaves that are otherwise hidden, but also a crash course in confronting my own conflicted agency as junior faculty who needs to yet mustn't talk.

Upon reflection, then, my title should actually be, "Learning to *Talk* Like a Peer." It is talk about issues of pedagogy that I am most sensitive to. Remarking on the similar kinds of laments about students' inadequacies he has heard at both public and private universities, James Seitz wonders "whether such laments are not a fundamental gesture in establishing and solidifying one's identity as a teacher" (41). Like Seitz, I don't want to lament, but sometimes I find it unavoidable. My move up the block is an encounter with a new community *ethos*. Although my impressions may be misformed by the prevalence of required courses in my teaching load, the "character" of this school's undergrads appears restrained, obedient, willing but not passionate, proper. This sharply contrasts a more politically liberal, even radical, socially diverse, and interpersonally looser student body at UIC. I am speaking here of group, not individual, *ethos*; classrooms are decorous spaces at DePaul. My students here say and write things like "Writing is all business for me," and "I like my writing a little bit impersonal, most likely because I always saw

school as a job." I am constantly asking myself how I can get my students to break out of the job mold, to be noisy, chaotic, relaxed, engaged. As I informally research how other classes here are conducted, and find a preponderant reliance on methodologies that contrast with my own discussion-based and student-centered methodology, I must position myself as a Them who doesn't teach like most of Them.

I know the problems I raise—a literature-entrenched department, an often passive student body—are not unique. One of the ways graduate departments might hear my story is by making the rhetorical intricacies of speaking to external, resistant voices more a part of graduate training. Necessarily, so much of coming to feel one belongs in a discipline is learning to speak as one of Us. Yet just as we begin to feel comfort in the disciplinary second person plural, we join a new We, and also must really speak (and listen) to many new Thems, including those whose offices are next door. Moreover, graduate students and their departments might do well to analyze and name the *ethos* of their own departments, and how this constructs their members as subjects. Certainly, my surprise at students' reserve is a reaction to what I had naively thought was universal student outspokenness. I learned to construct my teacher identity in what Micciche calls (she is quoting Patricia Ashton) a specific "mesosystem," "the general climate of the department and the institution, collegial relations, and relations with the administration" (444). In this job, and, I now imagine, with every new teaching mesosystem, I must reconstruct my teacher identity. Just when I thought it was stable.

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